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With visa delays, state circuses worry the show may not go on

By Julie Bisbee
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HUGO — Jim Judkins will not be taking his Circus Chimera on the road this season. Without enough workers to put up the tents, there can't be a show, he said.

Circus Chimera is one of four circuses with headquarters in Hugo. In the city that has long been known as the winter home for circuses, people are worried. Congress has failed to approve a provision that allows foreign workers who were in the country on H-2B visas last year to return.

Owners say that without them, many circuses are scrounging for people to help sell tickets, build rides and put up the big top.

"Most Americans don't want to give up living in one place, having a house to travel nine months a year," said Judkins, who has worked in the circus industry for the past 32 years. "Not everybody wants to drop out of college and run away to the circus like I did."

Waiting on Congress

H-2B visas are given to seasonal workers who must pass a series of background checks and reviews.

Workers with H-2B visas are allowed to stay in the country for up to 10 months and must pay all taxes.

Congress has set a limit on the number of new visas that can be issued in a fiscal year.

Under federal law, 66,000 visas applicants are issued during the fiscal year. That number has already been met.

In past years, Congress has passed legislation that allows existing workers in good standing to return on H-2B visas, but amid the debate for immigration reform, that provision has stalled.

"We just want people to write their congressmen about this," said Kristin Parra, with Carson and Barnes Circus. "We have lobbyists up there and they tell us that basically that's the only thing that's going to help. Immigration is such a hot topic, nobody really wants to make a move on it. It's just kind of being put into the mix of problems."

Parra said Carson and Barnes Circus has visas for 30 workers that begin on April 1, weeks after the circus has opened its season.

"We really need them to be here to help repair equipment to get ready to go out on the road," Parra said.

"We've been bringing them here legally for years. We're hoping that the exemption will be in place, but our philosophy is that the show must go on. We're geared up to go out. But if we don't have enough workers by March, we may have to downsize that."

Losing essential workers

Workers who help build and tear down the circus tents are in the country legally and pay taxes like the rest of the workers in America, said Jim Royal, general manager of the Kelly Miller Circus.

Royal estimates about 22 of his workers are in the country on H-2B visas. Some have been coming to work for the circus for more than a decade.

Without those workers, it will be hard to efficiently move from town to town when the circus' season opens March 15.

"It's going to make the tour more difficult for us," the circus' general manager said.

"They knew what they were doing," he said of the circus workers. "Mexico is awash with circuses large and small. We have workers who understand how to work with tents. These workers are a real asset for us. They are knowledgeable and willing to be out in all sorts of weather for 32 to 34 weeks at a time."

For Circus Chimera's Judkins, most of his workers come from the southern coastal Mexican state of Veracruz.

"Some of these people have worked for me for 10 years. They have wives and families at home and all the sudden they are without jobs," Judkins said. "Me personally, I can adapt, but I feel bad for them."

Three of Judkins' workers who won't return are men he calls his sons. They are deaf and mute and applied for a job with the circus by giving Judkins their pictures.

While working for him for the past five years, they've learned to read and write in Spanish and English and American Sign Language.

"I had to go down to Mexico and tell their parents there was nothing here for them," Judkins said.

Arriving legally

Isauro "Chago" Colio, 42, has been working for circuses and carnivals for 17 years.

This year, he'll spend the spring in Tlapacoyan, a mid-size city in Veracruz, working construction and trying to make enough money to pay bills for his wife, two children and widowed mother.

Working construction, he said he can make about \$200 a week. In the circus industry, he was making about \$700 a week, Colio said during a telephone interview Monday from Veracruz.

"I've never gone to the United States illegally," Colio said. "I've got all my visas to prove it. This affects my family a lot. We don't have a lot right now and there are a lot of opportunities. For all the people, it's the same, they don't have work."

Judith Flores, 26, started working for a Missouri-based amusement ride company to help pay her way through college. She's spent three springs in the U.S. working the carnival circuit. This year she's looking for a job and trying to figure out how to live on \$60 to \$70 a week instead of \$300 a week.

"This is a big crisis," she said from her Veracruz home. "I'm looking for a job, and waiting to see if visas will be available. I just want Congress to remember that there are people in Mexico waiting to come to the United States legally. I just want them to think about people who are trying to do things correctly."